Aftermath: Women's Organizations in Postconflict El Salvador

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Preface

AS PART OF ITS ongoing studies on the rehabilitation and reconstruction of societies ravaged by civil wars, USAID's Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE) undertook a multicountry assessment of gender issues in postconflict societies. The assessment concentrated on three sets of questions:

- What has been the impact of intrastate conflicts on women? How did these conflicts affect their economic, social, and political roles and responsibilities? What are the major problems and challenges facing women in these societies?

- What types of women's organizations have emerged during the postconflict era to address the challenges women face and to promote gender equality? What types of activities do they undertake? What has been their overall impact on the empowerment of women? What factors affect their performance and impact?

- What has been the nature and emphasis of assistance provided by USAID and other donor agencies to women's organizations? What are some of the major problem areas in international assistance?

The purpose of the assessment was to generate a body of empirically grounded knowledge that could inform the policy and programmatic interventions of USAID and other international donor agencies.

CDIE sent research teams to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, El Salvador, Georgia, Guatemala, and Rwanda. These teams reviewed literature, performed fieldwork, and conducted in-depth interviews with key informants. They prepared comprehensive reports, later reviewed by USAID and outside scholars.

This paper—written by Lynn Stephen, Serena Cosgrove, and Kelley Ready—examines the role women's organizations have played in addressing gender issues arising out of El Salvador's 1980–92 civil war. I am grateful to the authors for their insightful analysis.

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Introduction

DURING 1980–92 a civil war raged throughout El Salvador that profoundly affected its entire population. The war can be described as part of a long series of protests by Salvadorans who had been systematically excluded from economic and political participation in their country. The primary protagonists in the conflict were (on one side) the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN, and (on the other) the army, police, and other security forces of the Salvadoran government. It is estimated that one in every hundred Salvadorans was murdered or disappeared during the civil war. Although the national security forces committed the vast majority of human rights abuses, assassinations, and massacres, the FMLN also engaged in extortion, kidnappings, and bombings. The conflict ended in 1992 with the establishment of a democratic government through free and fair elections.

Women's organizations in El Salvador played a major role during the conflict and afterward in dealing with the problems unique to women as well as in advancing the feminist agenda.* This working paper looks at the emergence and role of women's organizations in the country. It seeks to answer the following:

- What types of women's organizations emerged during and after the conflict?
- What activities have they undertaken?
- What contributions have they made to the empowerment of women?
- What type of assistance did they receive from the international community?
- What problems did they encounter in using international assistance?

Finally, the report provides suggestions to international donor agencies for planning and putting into effect development assistance.

*A word about the difference between women's issues and the so-called feminist agenda might be useful here. Women's issues are those matters often thought of as affecting women's lives more directly than men's. Child rearing and protection against sexual abuse are two such issues. The feminist movement seeks to alter social, economic, and political structures to establish equality between men and women.

1. Women's Organizations in El Salvador

WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS in El Salvador can be grouped into three primary historical periods, each characterized by one or two distinct emphases. Preconflict women's organizations (1932–80) advocated women's right to vote and the integration of women into the labor movement. Early-conflict women's organizations (1980–85) were characterized by their attachment to a wide range of popular grass-roots organizations and attempts to incorporate women into these groups. Many of these organizations mobilized women around economic issues, survival in the war, and human rights. Some began to work with battered women and to question women's legal, political, and domestic subordination. But few were willing to embrace the concept of feminism. Finally, late-conflict and postconflict women's organizations (1986 to the present) are characterized by women challenging gender hierarchies within mixed grass-roots organizations and putting forth a gendered discourse on specific women's rights, ranging from protection against violence to correction of labor force inequities. Feminism has become more prevalent during this time. This chapter discusses the nature and types of women's organizations associated with each period.

Preconflict Women's Organizations (1932–80)

Women organizing around women's issues in El Salvador can be traced to the 1932 strike that led later that year to the *Matanza,* or massacre. In 1947, some women who had participated in the strike and who later were forced to hide their organizational activities formed the Women's League (La Liga Feminina). The league concentrated on establishing orphanages, improving conditions for women in prison, and advocating women's right to vote (which was finally recognized in 1950). In the 1960s and early 1970s, several additional women's organizations associated with the labor and professional sectors emerged. Thus, most women's organizations in El Salvador before the civil war were tied to other struggles, particularly labor. This trend continued during the 1970s in the period building up to the conflict.

The first women's group to grow out of the opposition movement in the 1970s was the Association of Progressive Women of El Salvador (Asociación de Mujeres Progresistas de El Salvador, or AMPES), formed in 1975. AMPES emerged from the trade union movement and was closely associated with the Communist Party. The Association of Salvadoran Women (Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas, or AMES) formed a few years later, defining itself as "a channel for the incorporation of those sectors of women who, on account of their specific conditions [housewives, professionals, some teachers, slum dwellers, and students], have not yet incorporated into the popular struggle" (Thomson 1986, 95).

In a 1980 document, AMES emphasized the disadvantaged economic condition of women over their collective gender identity (Golden 1991, 110). By 1981, however, the group increasingly stressed gender oppression, signaling a shift in attention that became more generalized in women's organizations by the mid-1980s. Seen as a threat by the Salvadoran government because of their ties to the FMLN, both AMPES and AMES were forced underground by the early 1980s, though the organizations continued to operate in exile.

Early-Conflict Women's Organizations (1980–86)

The changing role of women in the Salvadoran economy both before and during the war affected their modes of organization. Women were active economically, socially, and politically in many of the sectors mobilized by the grass-roots opposition organizations that reinvigorated Salvadoran society before the 1992 peace accords. As women became increasingly involved in the workplace, neighborhoods, and rural communities, popular organizations were forced to redefine their organizing strategies to attract and retain female recruits. Across the spectrum of the popular movement, women's committees were formed.

Although this process attracted more women, it initially led to what might be called "ladies auxiliary committees." For instance, Fenastras (Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Salvadoreños, or the Salvadoran National Workers' Federation) began working with female factory workers as early as 1981, particularly in the textile industry. In 1986 the women's committee Co-Fenestras (Comité Feminina, or the Women's Committee of Fenestras) was created. Its projects included a child-care center and a medical clinic. The committee's causes included countering domestic violence, denouncing human rights violations, and supporting striking women workers.

As women's committees formed across different sectors, they began to affiliate with one another within the political coalitions that mirrored the structure of the FMLN. In 1986, for example, Conamus (Coordinadora Nacional de Mujeres Salvadoreñas, or the National Coordinating Committee of Salvadoran Women) formed. Its members represented a hospital workers' union, the women's committee of a teachers' union, and an artists' and cultural workers' union. Other members hailed from the Eastern Confederation of Workers, the Confederation of Community Health Institutions, the women's committee of an organization for the displaced, and other women's committees. Conamus was one of five women's organizations that sponsored the First Salvadoran Women's Conference, held in September 1988.

The women's group Comadres documented human rights abuses. The group interviewed witnesses and victims, accompanied relatives to clandestine cemeteries to search for disappeared family members, and participated in the exhumation of the corpses. In addition to its political work, the group also provided support for political prisoners and humanitarian aid to families in need. Two groups similar to Comadres—though smaller and of

Comadres: Women Confronting Oppression

Comadres organized women to denounce publicly the arrests, disappearances, and assassinations of their children, spouses, and other family members during the war. Combining elements of the philosophy of motherhood with liberation theology and the international human rights movement, Comadres developed a new political identity and practice. Like the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, the organization took to the streets to denounce human rights abuses when no other groups dared. Group members' status as mothers initially provided them with a measure of safety: the government did not take their actions too seriously. But as their work became more effective, the government accused them of being an FMLN front. Increasingly, repression against Comadres hardened. Its offices were bombed. Its members were detained, captured, tortured, and, finally, disappeared. Despite the repression, Comadres remained active throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. Its activities included demonstrating in the streets, taking out paid newspaper ads denouncing disappearances, and occupying cathedrals, government buildings, and foreign embassies. Comadres members also reached out internationally for political and material support, traveling elsewhere in Latin America as well as to Europe, Australia, Canada, and the United States.

mixed gender—were Codefam (the Support Committee of Families of Political Prisoners and the Disappeared) and Comafac (the Christian Committee of Mothers and Families of Prisoners, the Disappeared, and the Assassinated). In the middle to late 1990s, Comadres began including men among its members.

By 1989, there were nine different women's organizations in El Salvador. Some groups represented specific sectors, such as the Association of Indigenous Women (Asociación de Mujeres Indígenas Salvadoreñas, or AMIS) and the University of El Salvador Women United (Mujeres Universitarias de El Salvador, or MUES).

Late-Conflict and Postconflict Women's Organizations (1986 to the Present)

The shift in women's organizations from supporting ongoing grass-roots groups to concentrating specifically on women's issues and rights was subtle but evident by the late 1980s. The change is well illustrated in an excerpt from "Guide to Salvadoran Women's Organizations," a pamphlet produced in August 1989 by the nine women's groups:

> Since 1986, a series of new Salvadoran women's organizations [has] emerged within the popular mass movement for social justice, filling a space left empty by repression of earlier attempts at organizing women. Each of these groups shares the common primary goal of incorporating women into the struggle to create structural change in Salvadoran society, which will permit social justice and the dignified treatment of women and the Salvadoran family. At the same time, our women's groups work to achieve rights specific to women.

The identification of "rights specific to women" marked the emergence of a gendered discourse in women's organizations and, ultimately, of declarations of autonomy from sponsoring FMLN parties. Although it would be another year before organizations defining themselves as feminist would surface, by the late 1980s certain Salvadoran women's groups had begun using a feminist analysis of gender in their work. The best example was Conamus, which set up a clinic in 1986 for women who had been battered, raped, or tortured. The clinic provided not only medical treatment but also psychological care and legal assistance, including services for women detained and tortured by the armed forces.

The Salvadoran women's movement reemerged as more powerful after the 1989 offensive, when the FMLN tried to recruit more women directly into its organizations to build strength for the transition process. In 1990, the Conamus clinic reopened. That same year, the organization began a campaign against domestic violence, resulting in the opening of a shelter for battered women.* Also that year, the first women's groups to define themselves explicitly as feminist emerged: Women for Dignity and Life (Mujeres por la Dignidad y la Vida, or Dignas) and the Center for Women's Studies "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera" (Centro de Estudios de la Mujer "Norma Virginia Guirola de Herrera," or Cemujer).

As women's groups continued mobilizing to advocate their interests, their ideas about women's struggles began to change. The signing of the peace accords created distinctly different conditions for women's organizational efforts. With the end of armed conflict and the increasing support and influence of transnational feminism, women's organizations openly challenged pervasive discrimination in the FMLN and other mixed organizations, such as labor unions and peasant fed-

*The shelter closed recently because of a lack of funding.

erations. They asserted their rights to define their struggle as being centered around women and issues specific to their own life experiences. The peace process resulted in significantly lower levels of open oppression and created room for women's organizations to forge a new path—that of working both with opposition sectors and agencies of the government. Dignas is one such organization.

Dignas: Women Strike Out on Their Own

The women who started Dignas in 1990 were all associated with the National Resistance (Resistencia Nacional, or RN), one of the five parties affiliated with the FMLN. Although the RN leadership initially supported efforts to start a women's organization, the relationship soon became contentious. As Dignas officials resisted direction from the top, they found that party leaders increasingly sabotaged their work. According to Morena Herrera, one of the group's founding members, accusations of sexual promiscuity and lesbianism were also used against them. Faced with such devastating marginalization, Dignas officials turned to other feminists, particularly those from other parts of Latin America. By 1992, Dignas had declared its independence from the RN and began to work with a broad sector of organizations—including the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of Education, and the Salvadoran Institute for the Protection of Minors—to educate the groups about gender issues and help create programs to increase the payment of child support by negligent fathers.

Not all Salvadoran women's groups have followed the same path as Dignas. Some have expelled from their ranks the more militant feminists while remaining associated with (though often publicly proclaiming their independence from) the FMLN party organizations. These groups generally refer to themselves as women's rather than feminist organizations. Regardless of how they identify themselves, the overwhelming majority of Salvadoran women's organizations have struggled to gain autonomy from the FMLN parties or from organizations closely associated with the FMLN. Many of the organizations remain connected to the FMLN financially, organizationally, or at least ideologically.

In the postconflict period, one of the most significant ways Salvadoran women's organizations have exercised widening influence has been through coalition building. Perhaps the most significant coalition-building process Salvadoran women engaged in during the 1990s was the organization of Mujeres '94, or "Women in 1994." This effort can be linked to the increasing participation of Salvadoran women in electoral politics at the local and national levels. Mujeres '94 grew out of an effort by the women's movement to develop its own political platform during the 1994 election campaign.

Mujeres '94 brought El Salvador's women's organizations into a dialog with national political parties and helped solidify a sense of a women's movement among different organizations. Over the course of eight months, more than 32 women's organizations participated in creating a common platform. It called for educational reform, reproductive rights, gay rights, improvements in the health-care system, women's inclusion in development, programs to prevent violence against women, and drastic improvement in working conditions for women in all sectors. Changes to eliminate discrimination from the legal code generally were also called for, as were reforms addressing domestic violence and discrimination in labor laws. Finally, the platform demanded the establishment of quotas for women holding political office and positions of authority in political parties. These demands challenged the boundaries of the gender system in El Salvador.

Another significant political experience of Salvadoran women's organizations involved hosting the Sixth Latin American and Caribbean Feminist Encuentro in El Salvador in

1993. The *encuentros* (or meetings), which began in 1981, have brought together women from throughout the Latin America and Caribbean region to discuss issues, ideas, and strategies.* The women who worked on organizing the encuentro in El Salvador tended to be those most independent and critical of the political parties. Many were simultaneously involved in the Mujeres '94 women's political platform.

Fortunately, the encuentro took place without incident, with more than 1,500 women in attendance. The meeting achieved a higher level of racial, ethnic, and class diversity than previous encuentros, with first-time participation from black Caribbean women, indigenous women from Andean countries and Guatemala, and many poor women from the cities and countryside of Central America. The experience gave many Salvadoran women their first opportunity to network with other Latin American women struggling with similar issues.

Every year a wide range of women's groups collaborates to recognize International Women's Day and the International Day Against Violence Against Women. In June 1997, many of these organizations came together in a series of workshops called "La Ley Contra la Violencia Intrafamiliar" (the Law Against Family Violence), which USAID supported through World Learning and Development Associates. The goal of these workshops was to develop a plan to guarantee implementation of the Law Against Family Violence.

*For a discussion of the other meetings, see Saporta Sternback and others 1992; Miller 1991; and Stephen 1997, 15–20.

2. Activities and Impacts of Women's Organizations

Activities

THOUGH EL SALVADOR HAS MANY postconflict women's organizations, this chapter describes the activities of only some of the more prominent groups in six important areas: 1) health; 2) labor, land, and economic conditions; 3) domestic gender relations; 4) political participation; 5) education and outreach; and 6) gender and the environment.

Health

The health projects of postconflict women's organizations in El Salvador have concentrated on nutrition, birth control, reproductive health, maternal health and infant care, and the prevention of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Mental health has also received attention.

Two Dignas projects illustrate the various attempts to get the Salvadoran government to adopt some of the services provided by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) for reproductive health. The projects are Casa de las Parteras (Midwives' House), in the village of Nombre de Jesús, Chalatenango; and Casa Materna (Maternal House), in the rural community of Talpatates, Belín. Dignas initiated these two projects to solicit government support and encourage similar projects.

The Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance has used NGOs to try to improve its coverage in rural areas. AMS (Asociación de Mujeres Salvadoreñas, or the Association of Salvadoran Women) and other groups have worked in programs funded in part by USAID, such as Prosami (Proyecto de Salud de Atención Materno Infantil, or Maternal and Child Health Project). In 1998, the ministry chose five NGOs to work in the health-care system's new SALSA (Salud Saludable, Healthy Health) program; however, AMS was the only women's group of the five.

The most recent and innovative work in health care by women's organizations in El Salvador concerns the detection, treatment, and prevention of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. As elsewhere, prostitutes are deeply affected by these diseases. Flower of the Rock, a Salvadoran women's group that works primarily with prostitutes, has opened a clinic offering women birth control, condoms, and testing for sexually transmitted diseases.

Women's organizations have also undertaken projects concentrating on posttraumatic stress induced by women's experiences during the war. In the late 1980s, some women's organizations initiated discussions on the impact of rape and the lack of legislation supporting rape victims. Comadres, for example, began work on the effect of rape and torture before the war concluded, and continued to offer workshops and counseling on the topic in the 1990s. Other organizations have held workshops and meetings for abused women.

Although federal allocations for health care increased in the 1990s and the government has established a battered-women's shelter, most of the work being done to help women cope with the toll of the war is being carried out by women's organizations, at least four of which concentrate on domestic violence and rape in the postconflict period.

Labor, Land, and Economic Conditions

The insertion of women into the political economy of El Salvador and their roles as workers, consumers, and procurers of household goods and services is the most traditional domain of Salvadoran women's groups. Many organizations that now specialize in other activities previously had emphasized women's role in production. For example, until 1993, Dignas's primary concern was developing projects that would generate income for peasant women, such as bakeries, local cooperative stores, and raising animals. Indeed, almost all women's organizations have attempted to implement "productive projects" aimed at providing women with small-scale income-earning activities that could increase their household revenue and provide better care for their families.

In the postconflict period, economic projects for women often centered on promoting microenterprise and entrepreneurship, by providing training in concrete business skills. Although Dignas and others have moved away from this type of approach, other groups have continued it. For example, Movimiento de Mujeres (or MAM) continues to promote productive projects and microenterprises. In 1996, MAM had four pilot projects teaching women how to establish their own businesses.

Women's organizations have also offered training in nontraditional trades. For example, Dignas at one point designed a series of training programs for women in carpentry, masonry, and auto mechanics. The group recruited low-income women and single mothers, providing stipends and child care in addition to occupational training, emotional support, and weekly workshops on gender issues. Despite extensive preparation, the graduates had little success in obtaining jobs traditionally held by men. Alternatively, Dignas attempted to help these women set up their own businesses. These efforts also met with mixed results. Cemujer has also trained women in nontraditional trades.

Women's organizations have been questioning land reform that largely excluded women's access to land. AMS, Dignas, and national coalitions such as Mujeres '94 have worked at national, district, and municipal levels to push for women's inclusion in postconflict land reform. They have been successful in some cases, most often at the local level, through connections with politicians such as mayors and city councilors. Another group concerned with women's land rights is the Institute for Research, Training, and Development for Women (Instituto para la Investigación, Capacitación y Desarrollo de la Mujer, or IMU), which concentrates on rural women. IMU has investigated the effect of land reform on women since the peace accords.

Domestic Gender Relations

A major theme cutting across women's organizations in postconflict El Salvador is domestic violence. This is related to the physical subordination of women and children at the household level and, by extension, in the larger society. Conamus did pioneering work in combating domestic violence by opening El Salvador's first battered-women's shelter. MAM has done important work to prevent violence against women, organizing Casas de las Mujeres (Women's Houses) across the country to provide individual attention to victims of family violence, sexual abuse, or workplace harassment. The *casas* also serve as training centers for community leaders and counselors who advise on legal issues, mental health, and women's health.

Other organizations involved in the fight against violence include Dignas and Cemujer. In their Program to Combat Gender Violence (Programa Contra la Violencia de Género), Dignas maintains a center to treat women victims of violence. The program also analyzes

public services in order to propose and lobby for improvements. A major Dignas project treats cases of extreme trauma resulting from women's experiences in the war. With USAID support, a team of Dignas investigators is carrying out research on women who were detained in the refugee camps.

Cemujer also addresses domestic violence. It provides legal, medical, and emotional services for women, especially victims of sexual abuse, rape, and other forms of violence. The group also maintains a hot line for women seeking information, counseling, or emergency assistance.

Work in domestic violence that led women to question unequal familial power relations between men and women has resulted in a movement that pressures men to pay child support. Asociación de Madres Demandantes (the Association of Women Seeking Child Support) has organized women who rely on the state for such support. The organization has made the issue of "irresponsible fatherhood" a national concern. By so doing, it has succeeded in calling for better services for mothers and secured legislation that prevents politicians behind in child support payments from taking office.

As women's organizations in El Salvador worked against domestic violence, they began to recognize that children also were primary victims of abuse. The Association of Salvadoran Women (AMS), for example, has a project designed to prevent child abuse and keep children in school. (Originally supported by USAID, the project now has other funding sources.) AMS works in schools in a poor neighborhood of San Miguel, Milagro de la Paz. It provides psychological counseling to young people at community centers. It also helps report child abuse cases to authorities and accompanies victims through legal processes. By supporting young girls, AMS is attempting to keep them from becoming prostitutes. AMS works to prevent the trafficking of women and children in sex by entering brothels and rescuing children (and women who want to leave).

Political Participation

Many postconflict women's organizations have worked to increase women's political participation at local, regional, and national levels as well as effecting change through legislation. A vital component of this strategy has been to bring women's political issues into mainstream politics. Women's groups have done this at the local and national levels by developing women's political platforms that include demands such as electricity, education, housing, health care, responsible fathering, potable drinking water, and an end to violence against women. Incorporating women's issues into mainstream politics also can be achieved by pressuring mainstream political parties to adopt women's political platforms, as seen in the efforts of the Mujeres '94 coalition already described. Dignas, MAM, IMU, and other organizations have participated in these efforts.

Women's legislative initiatives have also been used to try to influence the formal political system. A number of women's organizations have been active in this arena. For example, MAM's Citizen's Initiative for Women (Iniciativas Ciudanas en Favor de las Mujeres) is a multidisciplinary team that includes two legislative deputies, Laura Peña and Violeta Menjivar. The team generates proposals for legislative reforms concerning issues such as labor laws in the free-trade zones (where the majority of workers are women) or the laws requiring candidates for office to certify they are up to date on child support before taking office. In lobbying for passage of its proposals, MAM works closely with other groups.

As noted earlier, several women's organizations have made considerable efforts in the

postconflict period to promote women's election to municipal and national offices. They have been more successful at the municipal level, significantly increasing the number of female mayors and city councilpersons. Dignas estimates that 500 women had been elected to municipal councils as of late 1999. In organizing women on these councils throughout the country, Dignas and other women's organizations hope to formulate gendered components in local development plans. Indeed, all municipal governments are required to submit plans for a gender-specific component to local development efforts. (While such efforts are being carried out locally, there is also an attempt at national coordination.)

Education and Outreach

Women's organizations in education and outreach have developed gender-sensitive educational and training materials for literacy purposes as well as for sensitizing government employees to gender issues. For example, Cemujer is recognized for its training, holding workshops for a wide variety of groups, including many government institutions, branches of the military, schools, and health-care centers. Recently, Cemujer has worked within the judiciary branch of the government to promote a gender-oriented perspective among judges and their assistants. Cemujer, along with Dignas, has worked with the Attorney General's Office to promote gender sensitivity among staff and to redesign services, developing specific gender-sensitive training literature. Cemujer and other organizations have also used the media as education and outreach tools. Many organizations maintain equipment and studios for producing radio programs and videos. Groups use television commercials to give issues such as domestic violence higher visibility.

Several women's organizations have long track records in developing literacy programs for women, efforts that can be traced to the conflict period when schools were shut down. Using models of popular education (built on the ideas of Paolo Friere), Dignas and other women's organizations have organized literacy circles. MAM has also developed an innovative literacy program through its program on gender education. Recognizing differences between young and old women, and between women who can read and those who cannot, MAM created separate educational groups for these constituencies. In 1997, it had 92 groups in 38 municipalities spread over 12 departments.

AMS has a literacy training program called Educándonos con Sergia (Educating Ourselves with Sergia) that is designed to encourage the preservation of cultural heritage. One way this is accomplished is through *casas abuelas* (grandmothers' houses), where elderly women pass along their knowledge to young women who use it to develop teaching materials. AMS also helps communities establish libraries.

Although the efforts of literacy programs are important, improving the overall level of funding for education in El Salvador and integrating a gendered perspective into the general education program are more so. A model introduced with Spanish Government funding established a precedent.

Gender and the Environment

In the middle to late 1990s, a few Salvadoran women's organizations began directing some of their attention to women and the environment. Such projects may have been created in response to the priorities of donors in the 1990s.

Impact on Women's Empowerment

The transition of Salvadoran women's organizations from serving the needs of popular movements to articulating women's issues and organizing projects on education, health, housing, economic inequality, reproductive rights, violence against women, and women's land rights has been critical to empowering Salvadoran women. By 1991, more than 100 different women's organizations existed in El Salvador, each generating specific local and regional projects and frequently working in the national political arena as well.

In the postconflict period, women's organizations have built national and international coalitions. They have also joined in a major push to increase women's participation in electoral politics and to influence the political platforms of the major parties. Some have developed and implemented projects using less restrictive funding channels, such as solidarity committees, small international foundations, and NGOs.

All of these accomplishments have been important to improving conditions for Salvadoran women for several reasons.

First, thousands of Salvadoran women, by participating in projects as members of women's organizations, have gained practical skills, leadership experience, and organizational abilities. This affects women's lives in their homes and communities. Women's organizations have inspired more women to seek mayoral, city councilor, and other local offices. Women have begun to include their issues in local political platforms, incorporating their demands into the mainstream political process.

Second, El Salvador now has a corps of hundreds of extremely articulate, well-educated, and politically skilled leaders who come from women's organizations formed in the 1980s and 1990s. Many of the organizations had lobbied for women at international, national, and local levels. They are a largely untapped resource that can be integrated into the larger development process. Additionally, they can be the source of additional policy change to benefit women nationally through the legislature, government agencies, and links to the private sector and NGOs. Although a few of these women have entered formal politics, many remain attached to the organizations they helped form. The involvement of these politically savvy women is important for the further empowerment of all Salvadoran women.

Third, the emphasis women's organizations place on women's economic marginalization has spurred discussion about how to include women in land reform, industrial development, and other non-economic areas.

Fourth, women's organizations have begun to hold government agencies accountable for considering women's issues. Working with agencies such as the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance, the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Agriculture, and the Salvadoran Institute for Women's Development, women's organizations are influencing government policy and training government employees to integrate gender concerns into their respective services. This is a direct result of women's organizational efforts since the end of the conflict.

Perhaps the most important impact Salvadoran women's organizations have had on the empowerment of women during and after the war has been to enlarge the arena of public debate on a wide range of women's issues. The organizations have brought to the table for discussion issues such as abortion, reproductive rights, deadbeat dads, domestic violence (including marital rape), unequal work-

ing conditions for women, and many others. These issues had never been raised consistently in the legislature, political parties, town meetings, or private and public settings before the conflict.

Factors Affecting The Autonomy Of Women's Organizations

The experience of Salvadoran women's organizations is perhaps unique. Women's organizations in El Salvador began to form before the conflict terminated. Because they achieved clear agendas and identities during that time, the end of the war did not threaten their existence. By the postconflict period, many organizations had already established their autonomy. In many other contexts, women's organizations formed during a conflict become less active once the conflict ends. If such organizations concentrate only on needs associated with the conflict, their influence may decrease once it ends. Because many Salvadoran women's organizations established strategic agendas for projects that went well beyond the needs generated by the war, they were able to move forward when the actual fighting stopped. Some clues as to how this happened are found in funding patterns that evolved during the war.

In the late 1980s, funding from international development agencies became available for women's projects. As a result of this availability and the desire to recruit as many women as possible into the FMLN, women's committees were created in the various FMLN branches. To obtain financial support for women's projects, women FMLN members actively conceptualized and presented projects to potential funding entities. By allowing projects that specifically addressed women's needs, the FMLN provided women the incentive to investigate the material basis for their subordination. This process also enabled women's organizations to move from a clandestine to an open and legal role responsible for legal, nonmilitary development projects. Developing programs to capture the funds designated for women's projects also fueled an awareness of women's distinctive needs.

Another important external force that contributed to the emerging autonomy of some FMLN women's organizations was their contact with women's solidarity committees through tours, idea exchanges, and sister-city programs. From 1980 until the April 1994 Salvadoran elections, about 5,000 to 6,000 Americans went to El Salvador as part of solidarity delegations.* Such delegations continued in smaller numbers after 1994. European countries, as well as Australia and New Zealand, also sent tours and formed support committees. Women made up a majority of participants in the U.S. solidarity tours.

Although no systematic study has been carried out on the politics of women involved in solidarity organizing, it appears that a significant number of them identify themselves as feminists. One U.S. solidarity organization in 1989 began running annual tours for women centering on International Women's Day (March 8). Each tour brought 10 to 15 women to El Salvador and put them primarily in contact with women's organizations. Other soli-

*This estimate comes from Van Gosse, a political scientist who has studied the U.S. solidarity movement with El Salvador. His estimate was checked against the records of Cispes (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), the Center for Global Education, Witness for Peace, and Crispes (Christians in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador). The delegations of Cispes include those associated with the Sister Cities and Sister Parishes as well as those put together by Share and Nest, two foundations that, along with Cispes, directed their delegations and aid to organizations and communities linked to Fuerzas Populares de Liberación (the Popular Forces for Liberation). The Center for Global Education and Crispes were not aligned with any particular part of the FMLN.

darity groups have also sponsored women's tours.

Counting the large number of women who went on mixed solidarity tours and those who participated in women-only tours, probably at least 1,000 women who identify with feminist politics have come into sustained contact with Salvadoran women and men. In many cases, tours that brought women together resulted in U.S. or European women inviting Salvadoran women to their countries for extended tours of one week to two months. This created a means for U.S. feminists and Salvadoran women to exchange ideas. Today, some Salvadoran women's organizations are strongly encouraging the continued exchange of ideas and interaction with U.S. and European women (Stephen 1997).

These exchanges also led to funding for women's organizations by small solidarity committees in Europe and the United States. In other cases, people on the solidarity committees introduced leaders from Salvadoran women's organizations to funding sources such as Oxfam International and the Ford Foundation. Solidarity funds and small agencies such as Oxfam allowed women's organizations more autonomy in setting up projects than did larger multilateral donors or the FMLN parties with which some of the women's organizations were affiliated.

Unlike other women's movements in Latin America, the Salvadoran movement has grown during the postconflict period—an era when democracy in El Salvador has emerged. The two movements—democracy and women's rights—appear to be mutually supportive. When women take political roles in opposition movements (such as the FMLN) during a conflict, an autonomous women's movement can help ensure that women continue to occupy those roles afterward. Thus, helping women's groups establish their autonomy during, rather than following, a conflict may be crucial to ensuring future activism and a vital and democratic civil society.

3. International Assistance To Women's Organizations

SALVADORAN WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS currently subsist primarily on donations from private foundations in Western Europe, Canada, and the United States. Most of the funding is short-term and for one-year projects. USAID has provided funding to five of the funding organizations surveyed. Funds have often been channeled through umbrella organizations. Three of the organizations studied received USAID funds channeled through the Salvadoran NGO Prosami.

Most funding that Salvadoran NGOs receive is project specific and cannot be used for staff training, accounting controls, management systems, the development of plans for financial sustainability, the professionalization of governance structures, or general organizational needs such as administrative and operational overhead. Salvadoran women's organizations thus face serious challenges in meeting their administrative costs and structural needs, as well as in establishing long-term financial sustainability. Funding organizations want to support projects, not organizational costs. Ironically, institution building becomes a low priority when it is needed for future stability.

Effects of International Assistance

International assistance to Salvadoran women's organizations has had a significant impact on the organizations as well as on the women served. Small progressive foundations committed to spotlighting gender have developed better lines of communication with their Salvadoran counterparts than have large international donors. This in turn has increased mutual learning on topics of common interest, such as reproductive rights, working with mixed-gender organizations, and influencing national culture and political systems. Many Salvadoran women's organizations have received support from small women's groups throughout North America and Europe.

Since the peace accords were signed in 1992, Salvadoran women's organizations have also had access to funds from bilateral or large international donors, such as USAID, the United Nations Development Program, and the European Union. This is a significant change from the pre-1992 period. The large bilateral donors have encouraged Salvadoran women's organizations to professionalize organizational accounting controls, report writing, and legal status. Although positive, this has limited the autonomy women's organizations have to set their project agendas. The current strength of women's organizations stems from the period before funds from large international donors began pouring in. Having smaller amounts of aid but greater control over its allocation allowed the groups to develop a strong, independent profile.

Perhaps in response to the competition for international donor funds, many directors and fund-raising staff at Salvadoran women's organizations have concentrated on specific types of projects or donors. For example, some organizations, such as AMS, have worked on health with primarily North American donors, including USAID. Others, such as Dignas, have maintained a wide spectrum of projects with assistance from European donors. Meanwhile, Conamus has emphasized rural integrated development projects with donors from Canada, Germany, and the United King-

dom. It has worked with organizations such as Prosami and CREA International that channel funds from USAID.

Increasingly, Salvadoran women's organizations are experiencing competition from mixed-gender organizations whose fund-raisers have learned gender-oriented proposal writing. Many of these organizations have not actually incorporated a gendered perspective into their mission and project implementation; nonetheless, they write project proposals using gender-sensitive language, hoping to obtain grants at a time when funding sources are drying up.

Constraints in Working With Donor Agencies

Interviews the CDIE team conducted with directors of Salvadoran women's organizations indicate that while the groups have experienced problems in their relationships with donors, they have also learned important lessons. Tensions generally erupt over requirements donors place on already overworked staff for in-depth accounting and reporting procedures, as described in this section.

Undervaluing the Time Commitment Of Women's Organizational Staff

One organization director indicated that some donors have been surprised that AMS staff and beneficiaries have not volunteered more of their time. She believes that funding entities sometimes question women's commitment in a way they would never question men's commitment—for example, commenting when women ask for financial reimbursement for their time.

Difficult Accounting and Monitoring Systems

Project monitoring and accounting procedures were mentioned as an area of tension by most of the women interviewed. Several women indicated that some donors have imposed onerous monitoring systems. Donors may send consultants to criticize how organizations carry out accounting procedures but then provide no guidance on how to improve them.

Marginalization of Women's Organizations and Projects in The 'Big Picture' of Development

A founding member of Dignas remarked that funding for women's programs usually involves short-term, small amounts for individual projects:

> A lot of time, we see that the funds for women's projects are small change. The problem is that we can't get access to the larger pots of funding. We are not included in large-scale funding of development projects. … The funding agencies consign us to very specific areas. … Work with women has to be seen as an integral, complementary part of big development projects, not as marginal.

Several women interviewed echoed this view.

Problems With Channeling USAID Funds Through Third Parties

USAID-sponsored projects with funds channeled through other NGOs have been problematic for Conamus and other organizations. According to Conamus's Isabel Ramírez, project details have had to be negotiated

twice—once with the NGO doing the subcontracting (Prosami) and once with USAID. It was difficult to convince Prosami staff of the importance of adopting gender as a criterion for a particular project. USAID-funded projects channeled through other NGOs have not provided funds for overhead.

Clashing Time-Line Needs

Women the CDIE team interviewed frequently complained that project time lines reflect the needs of donor agencies, rather than matching the political and social reality of organizing women in El Salvador. As one leader noted: "Sometimes we have to practically run to carry out a project, and we can't always manage to complete a project according to the time line of the sponsoring donor agency. Political and organizational processes in El Salvador are not always compatible with the financial cycles of donor agencies." She and others suggest that more attention be paid to the political and social reality of local and regional circumstances in determining project implementation schedules.

Benefits of Working With Donor Agencies

Many of the directors interviewed commented on benefits from training in accounting, administration, and management procedures, particularly the help received from USAID. Donors have provided guidance and funds for increased oversight capacity, adding to the administrative capacity of AMS. USAID-sponsored training in accounting, administration, and management practices before its project was initiated helped Conamus's professional growth and sustainability. Another organization, Fudem (Fundación para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Salvadoreña, or the Foundation for the Development of the Salvadoran Woman), also improved its accounting controls and management practices because of donor prerequisites.

Likewise, the director of Ormusa (Asociación Organización de Mujeres Salvadoreñas por la Paz, or the Organization of Salvadoran Women for Peace Association) acknowledged that donor requirements have forced her group to professionalize its administrative and accounting systems. Another collaboration between donors and their beneficiaries to facilitate mutual learning, rather than one-way learning, would be welcome.

Sustainability of Women's Organizations

Although organizational sustainability is often couched in financial terms, it is important to realize that the political, economic, and social environment in which a women's organization exists can be a sign of its long-term sustainability. So can its reputation and internal cohesion. Because many of the women's organizations in El Salvador have endured extremely difficult social and political times, building their credibility and reputations and developing internal structures is central to their sustainability. These organizations do not have merely services to offer. They also have the experience of long hours spent democratizing and improving their governance structures. This work is necessary to remain stable and, in many ways, precedes the ability to concentrate on financial stability. The progress women's organizations in El Salvador are able to make toward financial autonomy should be judged in that light.

The sustainability of Salvadoran women's organizations will depend on their ability to continue receiving long-term projects that include monies for institutional strengthening. The women's organizations analyzed are extremely dependent on international funding. Though all stress the importance of having

financial sustainability plans, none of the organizations has had the opportunity or resources to develop them. None interviewed generates more than 10 to 15 percent of its own annual budget. All raise some income from fees for services or for such items as medicines, but have developed a business plan to generate income.

Income generation is an option organizations can pursue to gain financial sustainability. Salvadoran NGOs and grass-roots organizations that have succeeded in generating income have built on services provided. For instance, a microcredit organization can earn income from the loan interest it charges clients. Nevertheless, establishing successful for-profit initiatives can be daunting for organizations whose staffs are already overworked and underpaid, especially when an income-generating activity falls outside the scope of an organization's mission.

As previously noted, none of the organizations interviewed maintains a comprehensive plan and time line for financial sustainability. Three—Conamus, Dignas, and Ormusa—have been able to generate 10 to 15 percent of their budgets through the sale of services such as training, evaluations, and events coordination. Though this helps defray administrative costs, it does not cover project costs. Cemujer has also generated some revenue by selling consulting and other services.

Staff members from the other organizations agree about the importance of financial sustainability but have been unable to progress in this area, given the obstacles they faced. AMS is considering selling health-care services to the Ministry of Public Health and Social Assistance, but this is problematic because the ministry does not stress gender or consider domestic violence a public health problem.

Little headway has been made in encouraging donations to women's organizations within El Salvador. Yet, domestic donations would help Salvadoran women's organizations diversify their funding base. Encouraging the private sector to increase its philanthropy, however, is a long-term endeavor. Some Salvadoran businesses and wealthy individuals give significantly to their own charities or interests but not to women's organizations, especially those viewed as feminist. For example, the Poma family continues to support the efforts of the health-care NGO Fundación Salvadoreña (Salvadoran Foundation), founded by family patriarch Luis Poma. Additionally, many of their efforts are dedicated to promoting environmentally safe business practices and conservation.

Ormusa, AMS, and Fudem are the only women's organizations interviewed that are making inroads in generating domestic donations. Ormusa is approaching different banks and the newly privatized telephone company, while AMS has a small but steady income from individual Salvadorans. Fudem has built a network of doctors who donate their time to Fudem's vision clinic.

4. Recommendations for The International Community

THE LEADERS OF WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS and other observers of civil society offered many recommendations to improve the sus-tainability and effectiveness of women's organizations in El Salvador. The following eight concern the future role of international assistance.

1. Integrate the projects of women's organizations into large-scale development initiatives.

Do not treat them as peripheral. Women's organizations in El Salvador are carrying out critical development work that needs to be integrated into the overall process of recovering from the conflict and constructing an economically, socially, and politically sound country. Gendered perspectives are vital to all areas of development. When important projects are defined in the areas of democratization, the environment, rural development, education, and health, Salvadoran women's organizations should be part of their national project planning and evaluation process. Better incorporation of women's organizations into large development initiatives may also help eliminate competition between mixed organizations and women's organizations.

2. Encourage government institutions and the private sector to support, acknowledge, and work with women's organizations.

Many women's organizations in El Salvador have existed for almost a decade, some much longer. They have a wealth of experience and expertise in a wide range of areas that are important to government institutions, including child-support payments, domestic violence, reproductive health, literacy, and gender-sensitivity training. This expertise should be recognized and used as a resource in reconstructing Salvadoran society. Comprehensive gender sensitivity training and gender-oriented programs are needed in almost every branch of government and in many private-sector institutions, as well. The efforts of groups such as Dignas and Cemujer, which work with specific government agencies to train personnel in gender sensitivity, should be encouraged and expanded.

3. Support coalition efforts between different women's organizations and different sectors.

Donors should build on successful funding efforts that bring women's organizations together, such as the series of workshops on the Law Against Family Violence that USAID supported through World Learning and Development Associates in June 1997. This effort successfully pulled together a wide range of women's organizations. Building horizontal links among women's organizations is a key to empowering women in the larger Salvadoran society.

4. Provide greater autonomy in funding models that permit women's organizations to build projects in relation to their own agendas.

Until the early to mid-1990s, many women's organizations in El Salvador received their funding from small foundations and international support committees. These donors did not have stringent requirements on how money should be spent or on what kinds of projects. This funding model afforded more egalitarian relationships between women's organizations and their supporters and al-

lowed the women to develop an autonomous vision for their work. Future funding should follow this model.

5. Support financial stability and institution building among Salvadoran women's organizations.

Salvadoran women's organizations often overlook financial sustainability because of the more immediate problems they confront. Additionally, Salvadoran women's organizations have difficulty funding sustainability needs. To design financial sustainability plans, many of these organizations need increased administrative, accounting, or fund-raising capacity as well as staff training, management support, or more staff. Further, given the current private-sector commitment to philanthropy, it will be a while before Salvadoran NGOs can leverage high levels of support domestically. Major donors interested in promoting the financial sustainability of Salvadoran women's organizations need to free up funds for institutional strengthening so that the organizations themselves can decrease their dependence on donors.

6. Permit women's organizations to negotiate project time lines and funding cycles.

Many women's organizations have found that the time lines required by donor agencies for initiating, completing, and evaluating projects do not mesh with Salvadoran economic, political, and social realities. Treating women's organizations as planning partners and allowing them to help determine project time lines and funding cycles could result in better projects and more consistent outcomes. USAID and other donors should consider permitting multiyear funding and longer project time frames.

More collaboration between funding agencies and women's organizations, including personal exchanges, meetings outside of office hours, and the development of personal relationships, could foster a cooperative work model between donor agencies and women's organizations.

7. Fund women's organizations directly.

A significant problem for women's organizations has been the channeling of USAID and other funds through third parties—often other NGOs or government-sponsored programs. This has resulted in women's organizations having to negotiate project details twice—first with the donor agency and again with the third party. Often these third parties have no interest in or experience with gender-related projects and issues. Thus, when possible, assistance should be provided directly to women's organizations.

8. Continue to provide women's organizations with accounting, monitoring, and evaluation training.

Many women's organizations have responded positively to the management, accounting, and project monitoring and evaluation training USAID and other donor agencies provide. Such training should be continued and expanded to reach new organizations.

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